

## **The Synoptical Perspective: The Development of Latin American Narrative**

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"In America there are so many great and wonderful things that I cannot describe, because I don't know which words to use."

Writing to his king, Charles V, the Spanish *conquistador* Hernan Cortés recognised, that he was at a loss for words. He faced the problem of expressing realities never before encountered. And he had to find words, concepts, a whole frame of reference to sanction his taking the New World into possession, to legitimise the conquest. In some respects literary and political representations of the New World were parts of the same process. This problem of representation turned out to be highly complex, involving several questions.

First of all there was the question of experiential validity: Were the things described according to traditional expectations and mental schematas, or was description based on what had actually been seen. For instance, John of Holywood, in his *Sphera mundi* (1498), had described the natives of America as "blue in color and with square heads".<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, the question of political utility was extremely important. Representations are more than mental processes. They are involved in social practices, they determine actions. "America existed as a legal document before it was physically discovered," Roberto González Echevarría points out in his theory of Latin American narrative.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the idea of Latin America as a unity originates in the political interests and juridical instruments of the colonial powers, and the idea has become a reality to the point that opposition against colonialism has accepted the fiction of a common Latin American cause and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1985), p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive. A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (1990), p. 46.

Thirdly, in this connection, the question of aesthetical beauty must be mentioned as an aspect of the representation of the new continent. Almost five centuries after the discovery of America, writers like Alejo Carpentier and Miguel Angel Asturias were engaged in the search for "an American idiom", where sounds and sights would be organically related to scents and colors, and language acquire a biological and geographical dimension. Carpentier claimed, that it was impossible to express American themes in Castillian prose,<sup>3</sup> and Asturias wanted a language as "new" as the New World, a language with organical (and therefore often onomatopoetic)<sup>4</sup> links between signified and signifier:

*Hombres de Matz* explores the hidden dimensions of words: their resonance, their shadings, their fragrance. Because our problem is to create a literature which speaks neither of asphalt, nor glass, nor concrete. It must speak of the freshness of the earth, the seed, the tree. Our literature has to give a new scent, a new color and vibration.<sup>5</sup>

### A heterogeneous reality

The problem of representation also involves the problem of *who* is representing this new world to *whom*? Asturias called himself a "son of oral culture," but even if he transposed this oral culture to written culture, he could hardly expect to reach the analphabetic Indians represented in his works. The search for a representational immediacy, an unmediated and non-arbitrary relation between words and things necessarily ends in disappointment, especially if the words are expected to bridge the gap between different idioms, or the gap between Indian languages and Spanish. In a collection of stories, *Agua* (1935), José María Arguedas tried to render Quechua syntax via Castillian Spanish, but he never succeeded in harmonising the tension between the two languages and the two cultures.

Linguistic and cultural tensions are accompanied by political tensions, and in the "committed" literature of Latin America - for instance Augusto Roa Bastos' *Hijo de Hombre* (1961) - the duplicity of the intellectual is a recurrent theme, an inevitable duplicity if it is true, that the translator is a traitor: *traduttore, traditore*.

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<sup>3</sup> Alejo Carpentier, "Zeit- und Sprachproblematik im modernen lateinamerikanischen Roman", *Sinn und Form*, 6 (1981).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Studi di letteratura ispano-americana*.

<sup>5</sup> Luís Harss and Barbara Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream* (1985), p. 85.

Furthermore, the simple oppositions between coloniser and colonised, Creoles and Indians, country and city, have increasingly, during the 20th century, become obsolete. The process of modernisation with overpopulated metropolises, mechanised work in industrial surroundings, mass media etc. has created a much more complex reality. In the works of Mario Vargas Llosa - *La Tía Julia y el escribidor* (1978), Manuel Puig - *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976), and Clarice Lispector - *A hora da estrela* (1977), the "autochthonous" myths of Indian and Black cultures have been replaced by the myths of *fotonovelas* and films. An original and ironical commentary on the celebration of American idioms is given in Antonio Skármeta's *Ardiente paciencia* (1985), where Mario, postman and poet *in spe*, makes a tape recording of Chilean sounds for the man he previously served in *La Isla Negra*, but who has later become ambassador for Salvador Allende in Paris: the great Latin American poet Pablo Neruda. In his representation of Chile we hear: one minute of the wind over the clock-tower of Isla Negra, two minutes of screaming gulls, including Mario shouting, "Scream, dammit", three minutes of buzzing bees and ten minutes of Mario's newborn baby crying.

So, the general process of modernisation has posed new challenges for a literature with aspirations of representing Latin American realities. The clashes between Spaniards and Indians and then Latin America and Spain have been followed by clashes between oral tradition and written culture, rural life and urban life, autonomy and cultural imperialism. After 500 years, the Latin American writer is still confronted with Hernán Cortés' problem of finding the right words. His ambitious endeavours to come to terms with this history, to grasp the total, half-millennarian history in just one book - a recent example: Carlos Fuentes' *Cristóbal Nonáto* (1990) - bear witness to this obsession with the problem of representation.

In the following, I shall try to outline some wide-spread, if not general, strategies in the literary mapping-out of Latin America, hoping to find the right and relevant words for my description of, especially, the "new novel". I am aware of the risk of generalisation and oversimplification: The differences between Spanish America and Portuguese America (Brazil), between nations without an Indian population (Argentina) and nations with a large Indian population (Paraguay, Peru, Guatemala...), between localism and universalism etc. seem to support all arguments against general statements. On the other hand, it is a fact that, not only politically and philosophically, has the idea of "Latin America" had an enormous impact in the Continent, but also in literature has there, in spite of the protests of Jorge Luis Borges, been a marked interest

in the development of a common project. Carlos Fuentes' survey of *La nueva novela hispanamericana* (1969) can thus be seen as a follow-up to Cortés' discovery of the New World.

### "Things never seen, heard or even dreamt of"

One way of representing the difference between the Old and the New World was to define the New World negatively as a systematic violation of the laws of the Old World. The inability of the conqueror to fit the natives into the pre-established categories of human beings prompted him to describe them as subhumans. Ginés de Sepúlveda proved, on the basis of Aristotle's philosophy, that the Indian was a slave by nature. In the caption of an engraving from 1505, they were characterised by nakedness, "communism", cannibalism and lawlessness:

They go naked, both men and women... They have no personal property, but all things are in common. They all live together without a king and without a government, and everyone is his own master. They take for wives whom they first meet, and in all this they have no rule... And they eat one another... They live to be a hundred-and-fifty years old, and are seldom sick.<sup>6</sup>

If total difference is one way of characterising otherness, similitude is another. Hernan Cortés chose to cast his mission in the New World within the mould shaped by the values of Christian Spain. Indeed, he conceived America as a New Spain:

Due to what I have seen and understood as regards the similitude which this land bears to Spain, both in its fertility and in the greatness and coldness that is found in it, and in the many other things that equate it with her, it seemed to me that the most suitable name for this land would be to call it the New Spain of the Ocean.

However, while a *conquistador* like Cortés ended up using the Old World as his model, comparing the Indian cities to the reconquered cities of Moorish Spain, the Indian temples to mosques and the Indians to the infidel Moors and Jews persecuted by the Inquisition, a critic like Bernal Díaz in his *Historia verdadera de la nueva España* (1568) admitted the complexities involved in representing the newness of the New World. In a famous passage on the first impression of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan he writes:

When we saw so many cities and towns in the water, and other great settlements upon dry land, and that causeway so straight and

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<sup>6</sup> Hayden White, *op. cit.*

level that led to Mexico, we were awestruck. And because of the high towers and temples and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone and masonry, we said that it seemed just like the things and enchantment they tell of in the tale of Amadis; and some of our soldiers even asked if they were dreaming. So it is no wonder, that I should write about it in this fashion, for one has to marvel at it all so much that I didn't know how to describe it, seeing things never heard of, seen or even dreamed of, like we saw.

Bernal Díaz has to refer to imagination, to one of the romances of chivalry, to give an idea of this New World, but neither similitude nor difference give an exact picture of its *otherness*. Tenochtitlan gives the impression of high culture, technological ability, sense of order, and yet the indians practise the most barbarian cannibalism. He admits the difficulties in assimilating the overwhelming novelty of the New World, but nevertheless he has to recur to comparisons with *Amadis de Gaul* just to convey a sense of its extraordinariness.

In an essay on *De lo real maravilloso americano*, Alejo Carpentier sees Bernal Díaz as a precursor of what has been called the magical realism of Latin American literature:

[His chronicle] is the only real and trustworthy book of chivalry, that has ever been written - a book of chivalry where evil-doers were visible and palpable devils, where unknown animals were authentic, where unknown cities were contemplated, where dragons were seen in their rivers and where extraordinary mountains were seen surrounded by snow and smoke. Bernal Díaz had unknowingly surpassed the feats of Amadís de Gaula, Belianís de Grecia and Florismarte de Hircania.<sup>7</sup>

Alejo Carpentier's idea of a continuity between the old chronicles and *la nueva novela* in Latin America has been confirmed by several other writers, not least Gabriel García Márquez, who by the way also has admitted his inspiration from the famous romance of chivalry: *Amadís de Gaula*. In his Nobel Prize address from 1982, where he finds the germs of the contemporary novel in the encounter with the "disorderly reality" of the New World, it appears that here realism has to be a grotesque or magical realism:

Antonio Pigafetta, the Florentine navigator who accompanied Magellan on the first circumnavigation of the world, kept a meticulous log on his journey through our South American continent which, nevertheless, also seems to be an adventure into the imagination. He related that he had seen pigs with their umbilicus on

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<sup>7</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *Tientos y Diferencias* (1967), p. 112.

their backs and birds without feet, the females of the species of which would brood their eggs on the backs of the males, as well as others like gannets without tongues whose beaks looked like a spoon. He wrote that he had seen a monstrosity of an animal with the head and ears of a mule, the body of a camel, the hooves of a deer and the neigh of a horse. He related that they put a mirror in front of the first native they met in Patagonia and how that over-excited giant lost the use of his reason out of fear of his own image.<sup>8</sup>

The most radical solution to this problem of representation would of course be the one mentioned on the first page of García Márquez' *Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the narrator - tongue-in-cheek - states that "the world was so new that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate it was necessary to point at them with a finger." And yet, as radical as this solution may sound, it is nevertheless at the same time referring to a network of other texts with the same motif: *Genesis*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Alejo Carpentier's *The Lost Steps*...

Indeed, much of Latin American literature and especially the tradition of magical realism (Isabel Allende, Arguedas, Asturias, Carpentier, Rosario Castellanos, José Donoso, García Márquez, Juan Rulfo...) is situated within a dilemma: On one hand, it cultivates ideas of originality and immediacy, an "Adamic" language; on the other hand, it displays a sophisticated understanding of the interweaving of different discourses. In spite of all references to a mythical origin - and to the author as an oral storyteller, the spokesman of the people - this is a multi-layered literature. Therefore a history of this literature must be a kind of "Foucaultian" archaeology, an investigation of the kinds of documents "endowed with truth-bearing power by society at specific moments in time".<sup>9</sup>

Roberto González Echevarría distinguishes between the following kinds of "hegemonic discourses": Legal discourse during the colonial period, scientific discourse during the 19th century until the crisis of the 1920s, and anthropological discourse during the twentieth century. To these discourses I should like to add the romances of chivalry and the tall tales. Summing it all up, these discourses form a kind of architecture comparable with the description of Ciudad de Guatemala in a pioneering work within the tradition of magical realism, Miguel Angel Asturias' *Leyendas de Guatemala*:

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<sup>8</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, "The Solitude of Latin America" in: Bernard McQuirk and Richard Caldwell (eds.), *Gabriel García Márquez: New Readings* (1987).

<sup>9</sup> González Echevarría, op. cit., p. 8.

This is a city formed by interred cities, cities imposed upon one another, like storeys in a highrise block. Storey upon storey. City upon city. A book of old engravings, bound in stone with pages made by Indian gold, Spanish parchment and republican paper!... Within this high-rise city, the ancient cities are preserved intact. Images of dreams are climbing the stairs, leaving no traces, making no noise. From door to door the centuries are changing.

Turning over the leaves of this book, we find the incomplete chapters on the world-views of the different Indian cultures (*Chilam Balam, Popul Vuh...*), the chronicles of the Conquest and the reactions to colonisation (Garcilaso de la Vega, *el Inca, Comentarios reales de los Incas*; Bernal Díaz, *Historia verdadera de la nueva Espana*), the literary and scientific reports on the situation after *La Independencia* (D.F.Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie*, 1845, Euclides da Cunha, *Os Sertoes*, 1902), the novels of *La Revolucion* (Mariano Azuela, *Los de abajo* (1915)), the Mexican Revolution being, as Octavio Paz remarks, the first revolution of the 20th century, and after this, in the 1920s and 30s, we find the first pathbreaking "new narratives", to be followed in the 40s and 50s, and especially in the 60s, after the Cuban revolution, by so-called total novels (by Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez...) representing this history.

### **The tall tale**

The narrative of Latin American development can be plotted in different ways: As a romance like the romances of chivalry; as tragedy; as comedy. Perhaps a little unexpectedly, it might be suggested that comedy - or rather the comic mode (where expectations are always reduced to nothing in the confrontation with reality) - in many ways seems to be particularly suited to represent the encounter with "new words". Actually, cultural encounters characterised by externality, incongruity - and a general turning upside down of habits and ideas - invite the comic mode. The hunter, the sailor, the traveller, the peddler, all those crossing the borders to the unknown are known to be great tellers of tall tales, capable of spinning the most incredible yarns.

In a remarkable passage in his *Historia*, Bernal Díaz describes a playful confrontation between the Indians and the Spanish conquerors, where comic exaggeration, the germ of every tall tale, is represented as a strategy used by Indians as well as Spaniards in dealing with the transgressions of the known and normal world:

I remember that Pedro de Alvarado was keeping score for Cortés, and one of Montezuma's nephews, a great chief, was doing the same for Montezuma; and Pedro de Alvarado would always mark up one more point than Cortés had gained, and Montezuma, when he saw this, said good-naturedly, that he didn't want Tonatio - for this was their name for Pedro de Alvarado - keeping score for Cortés, because he always put two much *ixixiol* in what he scored, which means in their language that he lied or threw in a little extra for good measure. Cortés and those of us soldiers who were on guard at the time could not keep from laughing at what the great Montezuma had said. You may now ask why we laughed at that particular word: it is because Pedro de Alvarado, though handsome and well-mannered, had the bad habit of talking too much, and since we knew his character, we found it so very funny.<sup>10</sup>

In the good-naturedness of Montezuma and in the laugh of the Spanish soldiers, both parts show that it is possible to represent difference in stead of repressing it; that (a little) excess can be admitted - if not accepted.

Now, *ixixiol* is just a little extra for good measure. A much more drastic kind of exaggeration has survived from the days of the above-mentioned John of Holywood to the magical realism of for instance Gabriel García Márquez. Here all normal dimensions are suspended and all traditional categories transcended: Time, space, personality, prohibitions against incest and cannibalism are all put into play. García Márquez' *The Autumn of the Patriarch* has a more than 200-years old protagonist, has an entire ocean (the Caribbean) moved to the deserts of Arizona in North America, and has a detailed description of how a political opponent of the patriarch is prepared for dinner.

Originally, tall tales were told by explorers trying to surpass and outdo the overwhelming novelties of the New World with the overwhelming power of fantasy and language. A knock-down force belonged to them, the sudden reversals of the punch-lines really had an effect like a blow in the solar plexus (often being part of real contests, battle of wits, like the ones described in Asturias' *Mulata de tal* (1963). Tall talk that began in whimsicality and ended in blasphemy was, as pointed out by Kenneth S. Lynn, "a way of beating the wilderness at its own game, of converting terror into *joie de vivre* and helplessness into an exhilarating sense of

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in David A. Boruchoff, "Beyond Utopia and Paradise. Cortés, Bernal Díaz and the Rhetoric of Consecration", *Modern Language Notes*, CVI, 2 (March 1991).



power".<sup>11</sup> The yarnspinning tall talkers were obsessed with strength, size, scale and power, and through their boastful exaggerations, culminating in moments of sudden glory, they turned their savage emotions into a theatrical performance, allowing them release and comic relief through this detachment.

Later, tall tales became a tool for mediation between the experience of for instance political atrocities in Latin America and the complex of cultural inferiority in relation to modern, European culture. The play with excess and exaggerations shifted from the relation between Spaniards and Indians to the relation between different groups within Latin America and between Latin Americans and Europeans, but still with the double purpose of self-assertion and mockery of brutality.

The famous "Week of Modern Art", that introduced Modernism in Brazil, ironically cast this relationship as cannibalism. If they were ridiculed as "primitives" by the leading artists from the cultural metropolises, they might as well behave like primitives, devouring the advantages of the colonisers without being destroyed culturally.<sup>12</sup> The first Brazilian writer to call for a cannibalisation of European culture, Plínio Salgado, declared:

What I propose is precisely anthropofagy, the devouring of everything that is ridiculous in the face of our barbarous nature. I'm hungry for Frenchmen! We want to roast all philosophers and make mush of all those who bother us with their "n'est pas moderne".<sup>13</sup>

With this disrespectful, mocking gesture, a negative sign of cultural inferiority was changed to a good-humoured cultural identity: the avantgarde artists - Oswald and Mário de Andrade - called themselves "antropófagos", that is: man-eaters. Their assimilation of foreign cultural models took the form of mock-cannibalism. They exaggerated the differences, distorted the models, parodied them, laughed at them. Cultural cannibalism functioned as a carnival, where a kind of synthesis was ensured by the comic play with exaggerated differences.

The best example of this literary carnival is the novel *Macunaíma* by Mário de Andrade. *Macunaíma*, the Rabelais'ian mythical hero -

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth S. Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (1959), p. 27f.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Randall Johnson, "Tupy or Not Tupy" in: John King (ed.), *Modern Latin American Fiction: A Survey* (1987), p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> Randall Johnson, op. cit., p. 58.

"with no character" as the title says - is based on real myths collected in the Brazilian hinterlands, but Andrade has parodied the myths and made Macunaíma a comic figure, capable of integrating or even incarnating the racial, cultural and historical differences of Brazil. Coming from the most distant corner of the jungle he arrives in Sao Paulo, where he fearlessly confronts the signs of modernity:

Our hero was most confused. He had been woken up by some roaring animals, swarming deep down between the towering huts. And this devilish giant monkey, that had taken them up in the hut, where he had slept... What animals! What shapes! How strange they looked when they moved! And how they snarled and roared! And every now and then they spat out these super-white daughters of maniok, as if they didn't like them!... Our hero was very confused. The laughter of the three blondes had learnt him, that the devil, that carried them, wasn't a giant monkey, that it was called an elevator and was a machine. And from the early morning they told him that all these snarling, howling, neighing sounds, he heard, didn't come from animals. The roaring pumas down there weren't pumas, they were called fords, chevrolats, dodges, and they were all machines... And he decided to go for this goddess Machine so that he could rule over the daughters of maniok.

Mário de Andrade uses the tall tale to represent the process of acculturation. He unites different realities on one literary plane, making the tale a screen where he can annul historical perspective and all sense of reality in favour of a magical ability to switch from one world to another: To metamorphose into a telephone box is just one of the ways to solve a problem in this cartoon-like world. The only limit to Macunaíma's power is - humouristically - indicated to be linguistic:

He thought and he thought and then he came up with a decision. He would make a selection of all the obscene, he liked so much.

He frowned and remembered thousands. Even in Greek and Latin, having sniffed at these languages. The Italian collection was unsurpassed with words for every hour of the day, every time of the year, every occasion of life, every emotion of mankind. All kinds of obscenities. However, the gem of the collection was an indian expression, which cannot even be pronounced.

Miguel Angel Asturias, another pioneer of magical realism, also exercised his power as a teller of tall tales, for instance in *Mulata de tal*, that has been called a *novela hipérbole.*, but he characteristically conceived of the magical powers of language as an instrument in the process of enlightenment. If the word, as the

Indian believes, captures the essence of things, then to be able to put an exact name on something means to reveal it, to bare it, to strip it of its mystery.<sup>14</sup> Therefore the search for "an American idiom" became the key to Asturias' work - and therefore he considered himself the opposite of a myth-maker. The "right word", however, could be extremely long, a kind of tall tale *en miniature*. Thus, in *Mulata de tal*, the play with normal dimensions not only concerns personality (hundreds of arms sprout from a priest's body as he turns into a giant spider), space (mountainsides compared with the backs of enormous monkeys) and time (from the first paragraph it is carnival time). The play also transforms the language, that is dominated by puns, wordgames, "multiplication of syllables within a word to give a particular sensation or impression" and often extremely long, rhapsodic, meandering sentences, fusing the most distant realities. If the concept of the "right word" suggests a monolithic and monologic understanding of language, his literary practice shows every word as an arena of dialogue.

In his book on Guatemala, Mario Monteforte Toledo describes the carnival- "la Huelga de Dolores" - as the main source of linguistic invention and exaggeration,<sup>15</sup> but he also notes, that opinion formation in general consisted in different kinds of tales (and, one might add: tall tales). He mentions *las bolas* (very detailed tall stories of for instance plans to overthrow the government), *el chiste* (good humoured jokes), *el chisme* (slander) and *murmuración* or *comadreo* (more slander). In an article on his own dictator-novel *El Señor Presidente* (1946), Miguel Angel Asturias, who came from Guatemala, tells how this novel came into existence through exchange of this kind of tall stories and slander:

In 1923, we were a number of Latin American writers, who almost every night had reunions in the Café Rotonde. Here we chatted, and each of us told anecdotes, pittoresque, piquant or tragic, from his home country. Imperceptibly, as a reaction against this pittoresque America so beloved by the Europeans we emphasised the somber tones in these tales, competing in horrifying stories about jails, persecutions, barbarism and vandalism in the dictatorships of Latin America... This was how *El Señor Presidente* came into being, told, not written.<sup>16</sup>

So, although the tall tales originally were represented as a way of overcoming the stupefying or horrifying experiences in the wilder-

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<sup>14</sup> Harss, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Mario Monteforte Toledo, *Guatemala. Monografía Sociológica* (1985), p. 353.

<sup>16</sup> Miguel Angel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente como mito*.

ness of the Frontier, they gradually were transferred to the realm of social and political life, to experiences with modern technology and brutal dictators (see also Osvaldo Soriano's farcical *No habra mas penas olvido* (1974)). Instead of reports from the unknown, the modern tall stories have become reflections on the unbelievable things happening in an everyday life appearing to be in a permanent state of emergency.

### The search for legitimacy

The counterpart and the complement of the tall tale tradition is the Latin American fascination with law. As Carlos Fuentes has put it:

The Roman legalistic tradition is one of the strongest components in Latin American culture: from Cortés to Zapata, we only believe in what is written down and codified.<sup>17</sup>

According to Octavio Paz, this fascination with law has a double background in the influence, from Indian as well as Spanish culture. From here comes the obsession with ceremony, form and order. If for instance a superficial interpretation of Mexican culture would suggest a chaotic character, a more thorough interpretation would show, how the Mexicans were striving to impose order and firm principles:

The violent turmoil and the bitterness of our political fights testify to the importance of juridical concepts in our public life.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to the North American experience, the conquest in Latin America was a bureaucratic enterprise, the result of the Spanish Crown's deliberate and carefully documented initiative. If the most significant characteristic of the new State was its legalistic make-up, González Echevarría asserts,<sup>19</sup> then the most visible feature was the meticulousness of its organisation and the entanglement of the individual in a complex set of relationships with the central power. The grid-structure of the new settlements, the *plaza mayor* with its church and townhall, is a still-existing symbol of this centralism.

The importance of rules and legitimacy also put its stamp on Latin American writing. González Echevarría even claims, that Latin American from the very beginning has been created within the rhe-

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in González Echevarría, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1982), p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit., p. 48.

torical conventions furnished by the legal system. The crime, the defense, the prosecution, the search for legitimacy, the reference to evidence, the support from documents: all this has become a part of fiction. The hero of the picaresque novel, *el pícaro*, is this clever, unprincipled individual, who has become entangled in a legal mess with the central power, but who in and with the novel "writes to exculpate himself".<sup>20</sup>

The *pícaro*, who according to Carpentier has been one of the starting points for Latin American narrative,<sup>21</sup> is the link between the tall tale and the law tale. He lives on or beyond the border of law; if his society is constituted by law, it is at the same time threatened by lawlessness on all sides; he uses his language to outsmart his surroundings, not as a means of communication, but as a means of avoiding entanglement; he is prone to exaggerations; his personal encounters become daily dramas. The small things of everyday life turn out to have disastrous, drastic and often hilarious dimensions, when the *pícaro* approaches them.<sup>22</sup>

*Pícaros* and *coyotes* are typically the offspring of dubious relationships, and as "illegitimate" sons they incarnate the search for legitimacy which since the Conquest - and since the traitorous relation between Cortés and the Indian woman Malinche<sup>23</sup> - has haunted Latin American imagination - or at least Latin American narratives.<sup>24</sup> The famous opening line of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) - "I came to Comala, because they told me my father lived there, on Pedro Páramo" - is a powerful example of this haunted search. At all levels - from psychology to politics - the Latin Americans, this "species half-way between the legitimate owners of the land and the Spanish usurpers" (Simon Bolívar in *The Jamaica Letter*, 1815), have been caught in a trap of an unending violation and vengeance due to the question of legitimacy.

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<sup>20</sup> González Echevarría, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Sinn und Form*, op. cit., p. 1259.

<sup>22</sup> Actually, the *pícaro* seems to be made of the same stuff as those *ladinos*, those "Lazarus layers of society" described by Eric Wolf in his chapter on "Power Seekers" in *The Sons of the Shaking Earth* where we find the following description of the life-world of the power seekers: "To blind the eyes of the law, there arose a multitude of scribes, lawyers, go-betweens, influence peddlers and under-cover agents, the *coyotes* of modern Middle America, a term that once merely designated one of the physical types produced by mixed unions. In such a society, even the transactions of everyday life could smack of illegality; yet such illegality was the stuff of which this social order was made" (p. 237).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Paz, op. cit., chapter 4: "Los hijos de Malinche".

<sup>24</sup> Gerald Martin, *Journeys through the Labyrinth. Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (1989), p. 14ff.

In his cycle of five novels - *Redoble por Rancas* (1970), *Garabombo, el invisible* (1972), *El jinete insomne* (1976), *Cantar de Agapito Robles* (1976) and *La tumba del rélampago* (1978) - on the uprisings of Peruvian Indian peasants in the 1950s and 60s, the "silent war", Manuel Scorza has made a combination of the tall tale and the "law tale", framed as a picaresque novel with the characteristic playfully fabulating titles over each chapter. This genre with its loose composition, its numerous adventures which more often than not leave the hero back at square one, is perfectly suited to the rendering of a reality, where cases never close: "In Peru we have lawsuits, that endure for four hundred years",<sup>25</sup> and with new rebellions every fifth day!<sup>26</sup>

The protagonist of *Garabombo, el invisible* is a classic example of a tall-tale hero, defying normal dimensions, but at the same time he has devoted his life to the question of law and justice, symbolised by the documents that confirm the right of the Indian peasants to their own land. The invisibility of Garabombo is the literal expression of the neglect of the "white" rulers, a concretisation of the relation between the Indians and the Government. However, to those who can see him he is a giant - and a braggart. This is how he is presented in "Chapter One - On the time and the place where the astonished inhabitants of Chinche were convinced that Garabombo was invisible":

And then everybody realised that Garabombo truly was invisible. Almost classic, indeed majestic and incredible in his dimensions Garabombo went towards the storm-guard cordoning off the plaza of Yanahuanca... Nobody saw him. Protected by his transparent flesh Garabombo before sunset took the secret attacking-plan of the guard in his possession... On the outskirts of the plaza he stopped, looked over against the inhabitants of Chinche, weighed his balls in his hand in an arrogant and rash way. He was extremely courageous but also a braggart.

The reference to law and justice inscribes these fantastic dimensions in a real world, and this aspect of real-life legal appeals and accusations is emphasised by references to real persons and events, including to the author who participates in some parts of the novel - a chapter is called "A certain Scorza steps into action" - and even comments on the reactions to the first novels in the later novels. Thereby the novel itself is legitimised and the authority of the author ensured: This may sound incredible, may sound like a wide-

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<sup>25</sup> Juan Rulfo, *Garabombo, el invisible* (1972), chapter 9.

<sup>26</sup> Juan Rulfo, *La tumba del rélampago* (1978), p. 78.

eyed tall tale, but it is true, based on hard facts, to be tested by simple observation - and to be compared with the simple pointing at things in García Márquez' *Hundred Years of Solitude*.

### The scientific perspective

This appeal to hard facts points to another important "discourse" that has contributed in the formation of Latin American literature: Science. According to González Echevarría<sup>27</sup> a new "master-story", a new "hegemonic discourse" emerged as the gyrations of Spanish law became ever more abstract, out of touch with Latin American realities, and after Independence, in the 19th century, positivist science provided the methods and models for an understanding of these realities. If Newtonian physics provided the frame - the first chapter of *Hundred Years of Solitude* introducing the magnet and the telescope to astonished inhabitants of Macondo - then the sociological laws of Darwin and Spencer gave direction to the interpretations.

These interpretations, however, oscillated between optimism and fatalism. On one hand, positivism represented the ideology of progress, on the other hand, the determinism of Darwin and Spencer led easily to explanations of Latin American "inferiority", dependence and underdevelopment, as conditioned by biological and geographical laws. Mythological fatalism was replaced by scientific fatalism. Already the Enlightenment philosophers had rationalised the dependence of America as determined by the laws of nature: Montesquieu had referred to the hot climate loosening the fibres of the nerves, so that the Indians inevitably would be weak, apathical and bound in slavery, and Buffon called the American Indians "animals of the first order".<sup>28</sup> This view was taken up by the Prussian naturalist, De Pauw, who labelled American Indians "children" who have not yet attained their full humanity, because they are "stupid, incurably lazy, and incapable of any progress." García Márquez' story of a family, that, in spite of every precaution to avoid its obsession with incest, ends up having a child with a strange pig's tail, can, as Gerald Martin cogently argues,<sup>29</sup> be interpreted as a parody on this kind of fatalism, as it was developed in scientific travelogues, in sociological treatises and in the thoughts

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<sup>27</sup> Op. cit., p. 94ff.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Solomon Lipp, *Leopoldo Zea: From Mexicanidad to a Philosophy of History* (1980), p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> Gerald Martin, "On 'Magical' and Social Realism in García Márquez" in: Bernard McQuirk and Richard Cardwell, op. cit.

of the Latin American *pensadores*. : Sarmiento's struggle between civilisation and barbarism, the sick continent diagnosed by Bunge and Arguedas, Keyserling's picture of a swamp-like dawn of creation, Murena's thesis of original sin.

As an example of the impact of the scientific discourse on literature we may use the concept of "tropical style". It was, as shown by Roberto Ventura in an article on this phenomenon,<sup>30</sup> introduced in 1888 by T. A. Araripe Jr. as "a formula for Brazilian naturalism":

As naturalism emigrated to Brazil, it had to undergo a radical change. In the climate of and faced with the nature of Brazil, Zola would have to change many of his methods in order to adapt them to our sense of reality... The new literary school will have to be guided by the Tropic of Capricorn, it will have to take up all the feverish dreams in the blood of our nation, all this sensuality burning in the nerves of the Creole.

In a nature transcending the norms and classifications of European science, naturalism would necessarily have to adopt the exuberance of tropicalism, the extravagancies of the tropical nature. According to Araripe Jr., evolution would look very much like regression - what he calls *obnubilacao tropical*, tropical delusion or tropical stupor. The immigrants would have to "go primitive" in order to adapt themselves to this nature. They would have to be guided by their instincts:

Here everything has a short-term existence. Nature itself is a demonstration of this... in this country you cannot with impunity work with your brain. In a zone, where it is always burning, it would be suicidal to risk too much heating of the brain...

Thus, the concept of tropicalism represents, as argued by Ventura, an example of syncretism, a way of combining a scientific perspective of European origins, concerning geography, with the possibilities of literature and intellectual activity in this region.

### After the decline of the West

Even if tropicalism can be conceived as a syncretism, the general pattern within the scientific discourse of the 19th century was a network of antagonistic contrasts between Europe and America, between civilisation and barbarism, between rationality and su-

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<sup>30</sup> Roberto Ventura, "'Tropischer Stil': Selbst-Exotisierung, Nationalliteratur und Geschichtsschreibung in Brasilien" in: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht et al. (eds.), *Stil, Geschichten und Funktionen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Diskurselements* (1986).



perstition, between history and myth: Concepts like civilisation and history were only mentioned in the singular. The West provided the yardstick for the progress of the Rest.

In the second decade of the 20th century, however, a number of Latin American intellectuals lost their reverence for European civilisation. World War I revealed a capacity for barbarism in the heart of this civilisation, and at the same time events like the Mexican revolution were taken as signs of new independence in Latin America. Now it was Europe, not Latin America, that turned out to be a "sick continent". Alejo Carpentier has mentioned how Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* was a revelation to him. His explanation of history in terms of cycles opened new prospects for Latin America. History was no a unilinear process, defined by the standards and goals of Western civilisation. Indian and American culture could provide a new beginning. Culture could be conceived in a plural way.

The new relativism implied a shift in the choice of "hegemonic discourse." Now anthropology became the leading model. As mentioned by González Echevarría,<sup>31</sup> many of the Latin American countries created anthropological institutions after the debacle of World War I. Academies, schools, museums and journals provided the framework for this anthropological movement. And writers combined literature and anthropology to legitimate their writing: José María Arguedas, Augusto Roa Bastos, Juan Rulfo, Rómulo Gallegos, Lydia Cabrera, to mention just a few.

Whether as literature or as anthropology, this writing generally took the form of village studies based on participant observation.<sup>32</sup> The model of these studies was put forward in 1930 by Robert Redfield in his *Tepoztlan: A Mexican Village*, where he separated the "great tradition" of the learned few from the "little tradition" of the "folk", living in small, isolated, more or less self-sufficient communities with a simple division of labour and simple technology; a culturally and racially homogenous population, a social organisation based on consanguineity and articulated through rituals, a mentality with no sharp distinction between past and present, dream and reality. In short, a world promising full identity in contrast to the alienated life of an industrialised and urbanised modernity. In his *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* (1941), Ciro Alegría presents the Indian commune like this:

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<sup>31</sup> Op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. González Echevarría, op. cit., p. 14.

The field of wheat rippled gently, ripe in the evening sun. One stalk is like another, and all together they are pleasant to behold. One man is like another, and all together they, too, are pleasant to behold. Likewise the story of Rosendo Maqui and his children was as the history of each and everyone of the other villagers in Rumi. But men have heads and hearts, while the wheat lives only through its roots, and that makes the difference between them.

Down below there was a village, and he was its mayor and perhaps a doubtful future awaited them. Yesterday, today... The words teemed with years, with centuries.<sup>33</sup>

The optimistic belief in village life as a new beginning, a model for the good life, soon had to yield to a more pessimistic view. Juan Rulfo demonstrated it to be a dead end in his collection of short stories, *El llano en llamas* (1953), and his novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955). As the narrator in the short story "Luvina", a former school teacher, says to the new teacher, who is on his way to the village of Luvina:

San Juan Luvina. That name sounded to me like a name in the heavens. But it's purgatory. A dying place where even the dogs have died off, so there's not a creature to bark at the silence; for as soon as you get used to the strong wind that blows there all you hear is the silence that reigns in these lonely parts. And that gets you down. Just look at me. What it did to me. You're going there, so you'll understand what I mean...

Through total identification with the story-tellers of the villagers in the Mexican province of Jalisco Rulfo succeeds in conveying an atmosphere of total alienation, of ghost cities where everything is a shadow or an echo of other times and other places, a repetition of someone else's history:

This town is full of echoes. You would think they were trapped in the hollow walls or beneath the stones. You feel them shadowing your steps as you walk. You hear creaking. Laughter. Old laughter, as if it was tired. And voices worn out by use. All that, you hear. I think a day will come when those sounds will fade away.

The ghost-like character of this world is part of Rulfo's anthropological realism. The many voices and echoes of voices may be literary fictions, but they are based on Mexican folklore, the belief in *ánimas en pena*, condemned souls wandering the earth, taking part in the life of the living and being worshipped in morbid rituals.

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Gerald Martin, *Journeys through the Labyrinth*, op. cit., p. 73.

If Rulfo took the model of the village studies to a dead end in the mode of horror, García Márquez finished the decoding of this discourse in the mode of comic. In many ways *Cien años de soledad* is the epitome of a village study. It describes the foundation of Macondo, demonstrates its splendid isolation, and makes a display of the recurrence of events and names. Here there is no quest for identity, but too much identity: The Buendía family is threatened by incest - but in spite of their efforts to avoid the curse - incest and consequently a child with a pig's tail - they are trapped in the vicious circle of incestuous desires making the threat reality. Incest is the ultimate blurring of differences, and even José Arcadio, founder of Macondo and man of science, ends up tied to a tree, the classic symbol of the family, believing all temporal differences to have collapsed into an eternal Monday in March.

The comic, decoding effect of this narrative is effected by the narrator, whose dead-pan style at first glance reproduces events as they really happened, but at second glance creates a complicity between narrator and reader against the endearing fools of Macondo. After having told about Remedios the Beautiful's assumption into heaven in a flurry of white sheets, the narrator puts in a remark about some outsiders who were of the opinion, that she had run off with a man, and that her family had concocted the whole story to cover up the scandal. In stead of being the participant observer of ordinary village studies, this is a narrator who distances himself from the naive, the superstition and the self-delusion of village-life - and from the self-exoticism of Latin America.

A similar demystifying practice is evident in the style. Every time the reader has been enchanted by the long and winding fabulations, the narrator switches tone, so that the spell is broken. For instance, he builds up a picture of Pietro Crespi as the perfect suitor for Amarantha, a suitor combining even the most contradictory qualities like the infatuation of a romantic Italian and the good economy of a man, whose love makes his business prosper, etc. etc, but Amarantha makes everything into nothing with her laconical reply, "Don't be a fool, Crespi. I'd rather die than marry you."

The alliance between the narrator and the reader reaches its climax at the end of the novel, when Aureliano Babilonia in deciphering the manuscripts of the gipsy Melchisedes discovers that he is reading about Macondo, his family, himself, "the instant he was living, deciphering it as he lived it." In contrast to the centripetal forces symbolised by the curse of incest, this closure actually functions as an

opening, pointing to possibilities outside the fictions and self-delusions defining and delimiting the world of Macondo:

But before he reached the final line he had realised that he would never leave that room, for it was ordained that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be swept away by the wind and exiled from the memory of men in the instant when Aureliano Buendía finished deciphering the parchments, and that everything that was written in them was unrepeatable for always and forever, because those races condemned to one hundred years of solitude would have no second chance on earth.

### The contemporaries of all men

If unevenness of development and non-synchronism between the Euro-American West and the Latin American Rest has been the general background of Latin American literature, then *Cien años de soledad* can be seen as a fictional follow-up to Octavio Paz' seminal essay on Mexican character, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950). Here he declares that, after the collapse of all traditional beliefs in Reason and Faith, God and Utopia, there are no intellectual systems, old or new, to rely on:

We are finally alone. Like all men... Out there, in the open solitude, transcendence also awaits us: the hands of other solitary beings. We are, for the first time in our history, the contemporaries of all men.<sup>34</sup>

From his location on the "periphery" of the Western world, the Latin American writer gains the advantage of a view upon the world more cosmopolitan than what comes from the "centre", a little like the "aleph", in Jorge Luis Borges' story of that name, where the narrator through a little hole in the stairs leading down to a basement in one "gigantic instant" obtains a synoptic and simultaneous view of absolutely everything in the whole world. Octavio Paz characterises the paradox of Argentinian cosmopolitanism in this way:

Europeans were surprised at the universality of Borges, but none of them realised that this cosmopolitanism was, and could only be, the point of view of a Latin American... The eccentricity of Latin America can be defined as a European eccentricity: I mean, it is an *other* way of being Western. A non-European way. Both inside and outside the European tradition, the Latin American can

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<sup>34</sup> Octavio Paz, op. cit., p. 174

see the West as a totality, and not with the fatally provincial vision of the French, the German, the English or the Italian.<sup>35</sup>

Paz has taken this ingenuous argument from Borges himself, who repeatedly declared his belonging to a cosmopolitan, Western culture:

I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which one or another Western nation might have... We should feel that our patrimony is the universe; we should essay all themes, and we cannot limit ourselves to purely Argentine subjects in order to be Argentine; for either being Argentine is an escapable fact of fate - and in that case we shall be so in all events - or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask.<sup>36</sup>

Gerald Martin's comment on this statement is, that it is difficult to gainsay it, but at the same time you cannot fail to notice that it begs all of the important questions about the moral relation of an author to reality and to his readers.<sup>37</sup> These questions, however, have been at the focus for the reflections of a writer like Augusto Roa Bastos. An old saying has it that the life of the Latin American writer is bound to end with *encierro*, *destierro* or *entierro*, that is: imprisonment, exile or interment, and Roa Bastos has even claimed that writing has become a metaphor of exile.<sup>38</sup> This exile, taking Paraguay as his example, he defines as a multiple exile: the external exile of the country itself, whose landlocked inaccessibility intensifies the Latin American "solitude"; the internal exile in a world, where fear is enthroned as public duty; the cultural and linguistic exile in a bilingual country; the experience of reality as an exile because of the gap between reality as it should be and actual reality; and, of course, the real exile, outside the country, imposed on those committed writers who have "plunged" themselves into the living reality of their community, not to describe it in words, but to make their words real.

Whether occupied with metaphysical reflections (Borges, Bioy Casares, Julio Cortázar) or engaged in the material reality of the Latin American "regions" (Asturias, Rulfo, Roa Bastos), modern Latin American literature has in the last decades had an enormous influence on modern literature - and has gained a large public of readers outside Latin America. It is very likely, that the explanation

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<sup>35</sup> John King, "Jorge Luis Borges: A View from the Periphery in: John King, op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Gerald Martin, *Journeys through the Labyrinth*, op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Augusto Roa Bastos, "Writing: A Metaphor of Exile" in: King, op. cit.

for this world-wide acclaim is the synoptic view made possible by both privileged position on the periphery (Borges) and a painful position in the no man's land of exile. Magical realism has become a model for the literature of the age of multinational enterprises. As regards the problem of representation, however, the distance between the social context of Latin American literature and the cultural horizon of the new European and non-Latin American readership can lead to a still more complicated relation between representation and reality, to the production of a magical realism made for export. What started as an attempt to decode the myths of Latin America, to describe the fatal denial of reality, to engage in a painful unravelling of false illusions, now faces the risk of ending up as an exotic consumer good, the promise of an escape from everyday reality, García Márquez' magical Macondo as a parallel to another Colombian export article: cocaine. One should not forget that till so far the main contribution of Latin America to the international vocabulary has been words like *conquistador*, *dictador*, *guerrilla* and *machismo*.